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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASUNCION 000160

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PA](#)
SUBJECT: LUGO RENOUNCES HIS PRIESTHOOD ... AGAIN

REF: A. ASUNCION 0144

[1](#)B. 2006 ASUNCION 1280

Classified By: POL Chief James P. Merz; Reasons 1.4(b),(d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Bishop Fernando Lugo continues to lead presidential polls, prompting some Colorado Party leaders to argue he is ineligible based on the Constitutional bar against "ministers from any religion" being President. To overcome that potential hurdle, Lugo submitted his second letter in three months to the Vatican renouncing his priesthood. The Superior Electoral Tribunal (TSJE) has signaled to us a readiness to accept Lugo's candidacy; the Colorado-controlled Supreme Court, however, would have the final say. While some Paraguayan bishops have voiced support for Lugo, the Paraguayan Catholic Church as an institution has avoided to date weighing in on how Lugo's renunciation of his priesthood squares with Church doctrine. End Summary.

To Be or not to be a Priest

[1](#)2. (U) Monsignor Fernando Lugo renounced his priesthood in a letter to the Vatican on February 27 -- the second time in three months -- to overcome the Paraguayan constitution's bar against "ministers from any religion" becoming President of Paraguay. Anticipating the claim that under Church doctrine once ordained a bishop he cannot renounce his priestly title, he asserts that his renunciation is "unwaivable." He also invokes Paraguay's Constitution and Article 12 (on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Freedom) of the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights maintaining the act of "renunciation is a legal and voluntary juridical act that does not need to be accepted to be considered valid."

[1](#)3. (C) Acting Colorado Party President Jose Alberto Alderete meanwhile has threatened legal action against electoral officials who would find Lugo eligible to run for the Presidency. Lugo is not yet officially inscribed as a candidate (it is not legally required for another 12 months or so) and thus at this juncture his candidacy is not subject to any legal challenge. Disqualifying Lugo from a bid for the Presidency will prove controversial and could prompt civil unrest. As such, it will be a measure of last resort. Nevertheless, Alderete and other Colorado leaders clearly want to lay the groundwork for a legal challenge should they determine Lugo poses a legitimate threat to their 60 year hold on power in Paraguay.

[1](#)4. (C) Liliana Benitez, the Director of the TSJE's Public Affairs Office, told PolOff in confidence February 28 that Tribunal members are earnestly reviewing the legal implications of Lugo's candidacy. According to Benitez, TSJE Minister Rafael Dendia recently stated that if Lugo inscribes himself as candidate, the TSJE would be predisposed to approve his request assuming his legal team presents a strong legal case. Dendia reportedly indicated that President

Nicanor Duarte Frutos wants the TSJE to approve Lugo's request. (COMMENT: Duarte may be seeking to help the TSJE as an institution recover much of the credibility it has lost in recent months with scandals suggesting it answers to powerful Colorado Party leaders. Colorado Party leaders could then look to the Colorado packed Supreme Court to overrule the TSJE decision and find Lugo ineligible under the Constitution. END COMMENT.

Paraguayan Church Conflicted on Lugo

15. (C) Throughout much of the back and forth on a possible Lugo candidacy, the Catholic Church in Paraguay has sought to assume a low profile. Upon Lugo's initial announcement of his candidacy, the Paraguayan Episcopal Conference (of Bishops), released a statement supporting the decision of the Vatican to reject the renunciation of his priesthood. Bishop Rogelio Livieres reaffirmed that position February 28 when he asserted that Lugo's second letter does not change anything and that the Church continues to consider him a bishop for life. He remarked that the Holy See's position is independent of the Constitution and deferred to the Supreme Court as the authority to speak to Lugo's eligibility under the Constitution. Other bishops, however, have begun to speak out in support of Lugo. Monsignor Zacarais Ortiz, the Bishop of Concepcion Department, stated February 27 to the press that he has a high regard for Lugo, as do many of his colleagues, and further remarked that he believes Lugo is qualified to be a candidate for President. As an institution, however, the Episcopal Conference has not directly addressed the legitimacy of Lugo's bid under Paraguay's Constitution, taking special pains not to enter into the debate over Lugo.

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COMMENT

16. (C) By renouncing his priesthood for a second time, Lugo is clearly trying to get out in front of any Colorado attempt to challenge his bid on Constitutional grounds. The Colorados will want to avoid pursuing this defensive measure but may feel no alternative given their rising concern about their staying power in face of Lugo's popularity. The Church will be hard-pressed to remain silent on this potential controversy. Lugo speaks to many of the concerns they have about Paraguay's political culture. At the same, the Vatican has called on Lugo to stand down and Church doctrine argues he remains a bishop. At this juncture, however, few are showing their hand as to what move they will make as they continue to weigh options based on the evolving Lugo phenomenon. End Comment.

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